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INT FOREST & RANGE EXPERIMENT STATION

U.S. Forest Service

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JANUARY 1986

The storm track preferred a far-north groove in January. It took dead aim on Alyeska, AK, and dropped 191 inches of snow — the highest January total on record and 260% of normal. Two intense storm systems pounded south-central Alaska: on the 3rd-7th, Alyeska recorded 69 inches of snowfall (32 inches on the 4th alone); and on the 10th-16th, 63 inches fell. Many natural and explosive-released slabs ran during these storms, with fracture depths up to 12 feet.

In the "Lower 48" only Sun Valley, ID achieved normal-or-above snows. In the Cascades, Stevens Pass, WA -- helped by 20 inches on the 6th -- got 91%; Mt. Hood Meadows, OR, 84%; Mt. Rainier, WA, 67%; and Crystal Mtn., WA, 56%.

Conditions were much drier in the Sierra of California, where Mammoth Mtn. recorded 48% of normal and Alpine Meadows, only 28% -- its second driest January on record. June Mtn. was California's snowiest site and was greatly helped by 31 inches on the 30th-31st.

In the Intermountain region, Sun Valley achieved 100%; Bridger Bowl, MT, 61%; and Snowbird, UT, 53%. Colorado was drier still: in northern Colorado, Berthoud Pass, 59%; Copper Mtn., 48%; Winter Park, 47%; Breckenridge, 41%; and Vail, 38%; in central Colorado, Gothic, 29%; Sunlight, 23%; Crested Butte, 22%; Aspen Mtn., 21%; and Monarch, 18%; and in southern Colorado, Wolff Creek, 6%. All sites in central and southern Colorado experienced the driest January ever; most sites throughout the state enjoyed their warmest or second warmest on record. Taos, NM had only day with snowfall, recorded only 16% of normal, and suffered its driest January ever.

Avalanche accidents were mostly minor in January: four incidents on the 6th, 7th, and 8th caught five skiers and patrollers in Colorado, Montana, and Utah. A major incident, though, happened on the 6th in an area called Windy Pass in Provo Canyon, UT. A ski tourer triggered a shallow soft slab on a steep slope that swept him on a fast ride through trees. His two friends, using beacons, located and uncovered the victim from a shallow burial within five minutes, but could not revive him. He most likely died from injuries sustained from collisions with trees.

Statistics through January show that 2,915 avalanches have been recorded in the U.S. -- an extraordinarily low number. 37 people have been caught, 22 wholly or partly buried, 5 injured, and 8 killed.

Rocky Mountain Forest and Range Experiment Station

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